

[Miss Sallie's Cook]

Approximately 3,200 words SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: MISS SALLIE'S COOK

Date of First Writing March 2, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Annie Squire (Negro)

Fictitious Name Ruby Childs

Street Address 1222 Barnwell Street

Place Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Cook

Name of Writer Verner Lea

Name of Reviser State Office

On approaching my destination, I heard a conversation taking place between Ruby and her neighbor, which ran something like this: "Sister Jasper, was you at the Ebenezer Baptist, Sunday night gone?"

"Ruby, I ain't been to that church since the argument I told you 'bout. What's more, I'm thinkin' 'bout joinin' up wid the Methodist. Anybody 'cuse me of short changing the plate, I figure they's all crooks.

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"Ef I'd had a piece o' extra change I would o' been glad to give 'em the whole quarter. [??]
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"Well, when I put my quarter in the plate, I took out fifteen cent change. Brother Sikes argue me up and down. He stood there and let all the congregation hear him call me a thief and a liar. Said after I put in the twenty-five cent, I didn't take our a dime and a nickle, but 'stead, I took back the quarter, and ten cent beside.

"I told him he's so crooked he oughter sleep on a corkscrew. Then I put on my coat and switched out, and don't aim to never go back."

"Well, what I mean to tell you, Sister Jasper, there was sho' some cuttin' up Sunday night gone.

"Everybody was settin' there quiet-like, and Parson Brown was leaden' in prayer. All of a sudden we heard the awfulest goin's on just outside the church door. Such a hollering, cussin', and carryin' on you never did hear.

"First thing you know, Parson Brown's boy come splittin' up the aisle cryin' to the top o' his voice and a-holdin' on to his ear. He run up to his pa, grab him round the legs, and holler and cry 'til he near 'bout broke up the meetin'.

"Him and dat little sinner, Coon, got to arguin' over a bottle o' pop. Finally, they got to fightin', and Coon near 'bout chewed Jake's ear off.

"I don't see what makes Jake hang around Coon so much, 'cause they ain't nothin' but trouble when them two gets together.

"But you know that preacher turn it all off so smooth-like. He say, 'Set down, Son. I'll anoint your soul, and your ear will be all right.'

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“He had done already choose his text, but he 'pologised to the congregation. He told 'em he was awful embarrassed about Jake and Coon, but boys would be boys. And seein' what had jus' took place, he was gonna preach on 3 peace. Keepin' the peace.

“He preached one o' the finest sermons I ever hear. He sent one o' the ushers out to get Coon. But Coon done lit out up a alley wid the bottle o' pop. He was makin' tracks for home.

“I been a member o' that church for many a year, but that was 'bout the best piece o' preachin' I ever hear Parson Brown put out yet.

“Jake, he jus' set there, with tears in his eyes, like the spirit was comin' on him. He's a puny little fellow, and Coon ain't got no right to be always jumpin' on him.

As this dialogue came to an end, I arose from my temporary seat on the steps. Walking around the side of the house, I found Ruby busily engaged in hanging out clothes. As she turned and saw me, her greeting was one of genuine welcome.

“How you, Mis' Polly? Lord, child, I ain't had a chance to clean my house yet. Take this chair on the porch. We'll jus' set here in the sun.”

Although I had known Ruby for a number of years, and she had often helped me in various ways in my house, our acquaintance had never gone beyond the surface.

She is a typical Negro; fat, good-natured, and very black, with lips that resemble toy balloons. Her optimism is a trait worthy of note. Just one of Ruby's ridiculous remarks will cast a rosy glow, where formerly all was blue. She is always dressed in a blue uniform and white apron, with the proverbial rag tied around her kinky black head. Her perpetual grin displays three prominent gold teeth. Though thirty-five years old, she sticks to her socks, winter and summer. Sometimes, in very cold weather, she wears hose. But even then, the socks must come on, too.

"Mis' Polly, you'll be thinkin' I'm a trifling housekeeper. But I had to get these clothes out. I generally keeps my three rooms right tidy. I woulder been through, but Sister Jasper been sick. I had to pass her the news over the back fence, 'cause she can't get out.

"Jus' me and my brother Bud live here. He works on a W.P.A. job and pays half the rent and half o' everything. Ever now and then he buys me a dress or hat or some sort o' little gift for a surprise. He's one more good boy.

"No, God! I ain't got no husband. And what's more, I don't want one. I had one o' them things once. But I sho' ain't lookin' for no more.

"I don't like to think and talk about them days, Mis' Polly. When I do, I gets a misery in my head.

"I was born in St. Matthews, South Carolina. Ma died when I was four years old. My pa was Amos Giles, and he wan't nothin' to brag on, either. When I was eleven, me and Pa and Bud come to Columbia. Pa got a job at the Blume Lumber Company.

"We done pretty well for awhile. But it wan't long 'til Pa got to drinkin', goin' out nights and keepin' bad company. 'Seem like he start hoppin' on me for any little thing.

"I was little, but I tried to do the best I know how. I'd stay home, cook his meals, and wash his and Bud's clothes. But jus' seem like didn't nothin' suit him no more.

"All that time, I was tryin' to get a little education, too. The most I ever got, though, was jus' a inklin' of readin' and writin'.

"Pa was all the time after me about gettin' out and findin' work. look like heap o' times he try to be good to me. But he jus' couldn't help 5 bein' mean. Sometimes, he act jus' like Satan was backin' him up.

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"One night he jus' fuss and wrangle wid me half the night. The next day when I come from school, he was settin' on the porch. I set down on the doorstep and never said nothin'. After while, he say; 'Ain't you hungry?'

"Reckon he thought I'd have a nerve to eat his food. He got up, walked back in the kitchen, and brought me a big plate o' collards, corn bread, and sweet potatoes.

"Seem like after I ate, I feel kinder sorry for him. So I got up, went inside, cleaned up the house good, and ironed him a shirt and a pair o' blue jeans. Then I build up the fire and got his supper hot and lit the lamp and called him to come eat.

"When he come in, he was lit up like a church. I didn't say nothin'. But he hadn't hardly set down, before he got to abusin' me for everything he could think of. Call me lazy and triflin' and good for nothin'. Keep wantin' to know how come I don't get me a job like Bud.

"Course it's true Bud did get a job. But after he got it, Pa made it so hot for him he lef' home. Anyhow, Pa talk and cuss so I couldn't stand it no longer.

"After while I say: 'I'm sorry Pa, I'll leave home. I'll go on back to St. Matthews. I'll go stay with Aunt Lizzie. She's gettin old, maybe I can be of some service to her. I can feed her pig, and wash, and relieve her of some o' her work. Do enough so I won't feel imposin' on nobody.'

"Pa got up, staggered over to the shelf, and took his last drink o' brandy. Then he went to bed."

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Ruby sat alone, with tear-dimmed eyes, and thought. Finally, she retrieved a worn and battered suitcase from under the bed. She dusted it off/ and began packing her worldly goods, which consisted of little more than a few torn and tattered garments. This done, she, too, retired.

She would sleep until day, then go to the garage where Bud worked. He would find her a way to Aunt Lizzie's.

The following morning, Amos awoke to an irregular ticking of an ancient and battered timepiece, which he found on this occasion most annoying to his head. He had a mind to shout for Ruby. Maybe she could do something to ease his misery. But he didn't hear Ruby moving about the house, as was her custom of a morning. As the fog began to lift, and his brain showed signs of normal functioning, he recollected drowsily, "Poor Ruby, maybe she ain't here anymore. What was that she said last night about leaving?"

Dressing himself with jittery, nervous hands, he went into the kitchen. Instead of the warmth of the cook stove, and the aroma of good, hot coffee, everything was cold, bare, and lifeless. On the table he found a note. With trembling fingers he opened and read the following: "Dear Pa, when you reads this, I'll be on my way to Aunt Lizzie's. Take care of yourself. I hopes you make out all right. Ruby."

As Amos struggled with the fire in the cook stove and prepared his frugal breakfast, he began to think that Ruby wasn't such a bad girl after all. He reproached himself for his mean and low-life ways, saying to himself, "I'll write her a letter and tell her I'm sorry and want her to come on back. She's just thirteen years old. Too young to be out on her own. Yes, I'll write poor little Rube a letter."

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"After I lef', I got to goin' with a man right smart older than me. He seem like a nice man, and we kept company right regular. He kept after me to marry him. He tell me how good he would be to me and how he'd make up for all the trouble I'd had at home.

"Well, long 'bout Christmas time, I let his persuadin' ways and big talk do the devilment. I wasn't but fourteen years old.

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"We got us a room in a roomin' house and lived together four months to the day. He picked up and left me high and dry, and me with a unborn child.

"Seem like me bein' young, I jus' cry day and night. I didn't know what to do; me with no job and no nothin'. The people in the house treat me kind for awhile. I guess they was sorry for me.

"I'd go out every day and pick a little cotton. But seem like that didn't pay me nothin' hardly. The people in the house got to howlin' for their room rent. I near 'bout went crazy. I jus' didn't have no heart for nothin'. Many a time I come near to perishin'.

"I figured I'd better go on back to Aunt Lizzie, 'cause it was gettin' most time.

"I prayed the Lord to soften her heart, to see to it that she'd forgive me for skippin' off with that bastard. She told me he wan't up to no good.

"I got there late one Saturday afternoon. Bein' scared and timid-like, I knock on the door easy. When she open it, she put her hands on her fat hips and jus' look at me long and hard. Then she say, 'chickens always comes home to roost. But you'll sho' have to find you another roostin' place.'

"She say I made my bed, and in it I'd have to lie. Then my feet jus' come out from under me. I dropped on the doorstep and near 'bout sob my 8 heart out.

"She went back in and slam the door. Lef' me settin' there 'bout a hour. Then she came back and hand me a dipper of cold spring water.

"Drink this, then come on in the cook room and get you some supper. If you walked all the way, I guess you most famished, and wore out, too . I got spoon bread, some nice spareribs, and a pot o' rutabagas."

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With this evidence of Aunt Lizzie's big, kind heart and relenting spirit, Ruby dried her tears. She followed her meekly into the kitchen.

"Set down and eat now. No use cryin' over spilt milk."

"The very next day my poor little youngun was born. But jus' live two hours. You see it was too previous.

"My own mother couldn't a been better to me than Aunt Lizzie. She was so good and kind. I lay there with tears in my eyes. I made up my mind if the Lord spared me I'd repay her.

"It was her goodness to me that made me see everything different-like. "When I got able, I relieved her of all the work I could. I learned to sew, and would keep her clothes patched. One time Bud sent me a little money, and I bought her a dress.

"God bless her! She's dead now, but I know she res' in heavenly peace.

"When I was seventeen, I got a letter from Bud sayin' Pa was dead. I come on back to Columbia. I got me a good job as cook. I cooked for that family five years. Then they moved to Charleston. I've done different things. I had me a job with the W.P.A. for awhile. I raked up leaves and trash in Valley Park. But I've cooked mostly all my life. I'm cookin' for a fine family of folks now. I been workin' for Mrs. Sallie Jenkins for three years, Mis' Sallie sho' good to me. She give me clothes and food and lets me off ever other Sunday.

"These people is God-like. They goes to church ever Sunday, and to prayer meetin', too. You never see 'em set down to eat without sayin' a blessin'. They got two fine head o' chillun. Just as nice and polite as any I ever see.

"You know Mis' Sallie is forewoman of a sewin' room project. She must have a sight in that room. I laughs at the things she tells me sometime.

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"She say ever since she been there, she hafter get up and make this same speech ever mornin':

"Now, Ladies, there is to be no smoking, chewin', or dippin' on the project. Anybody caught disobeyin' these rules will be cut off.'

"But Mis' Sallie so good, she makes sho' not to catch 'em. She sho' had to shut her eyes one time, though. It was a Monday mornin', and she wasn't feelin' so good. Reckon her nerves was jus' shot. She called the nurse and told her to go through all the machine drawers. Told the ladies to jus' set still. When the nurse got to old Mis' Minnie Grime's machine, that old lady got to shaken' like a leaf. Made out one of the drawers was stuck. But the nurse took it and give it a jerk. She found Mrs. Grimes' tobacco and, what's more, a jar o' tobacco juice. Mis' Minnie jus' cried and carried on, and Mis' Sallie didn't have the heart to do nothin' to the poor soul. She been chewin' all her life. Reckon that's 'bout all the pleasure she gets.

"Mis' Sallie said she use to start the day off by readin' the Scripture and sayin' the Lord's Prayer. Seem like that done 'em all good. But 10 she got orders from headquarters to cut it out. Said they was there to work and not to pray. There wasn't no time for such as that. If they didn't turn out two and three pair o' pants a day, all the prayin' in the world wouldn't bind their jobs.

"Mis' Sallie hate it so when they make 'em quit prayin'. She said that look so ungodly. No wonder people gettin' so tough, and jus' backslidin' all the time.

"My road ain't been clear sailin', but I'm tryin' to improve my ways.

"I say go forward. If you can't go forward, it's better to balk like a mule in a creek. Just stand still and think over the thing awhile. First thing you know, you goin' straight. But for God's sake don't go backwards.

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"Mis' Sallie worryin' her head 'bout this relief now. She say they gonna cut off a heap of 'em. Well, I hope they don't cut her off. If they cuts her off, then I'll get cut off, too.

"Bud, say he hear talk o' cuttin' out his project. What will the people do? That's like wreckin' the ship in midstream befo' it gets where it's goin'.

"Well, all I can say is trust in the Lord and pray. The Scripture say prayer will sho' take us where we goin'. And I'm bound for the Promise Land."